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ABSTRACT

This study investigated changes in marital relations during the transition to parenthood, including changes in the stability and quality of the relationship and in marital support. Subjects were 95 families studied from the beginning of the mother's pregnancy until the children were 10-12 months old. Parents differed in previous parental experience, education level, and mother's job status. Findings showed a relative decrease in several aspects of married life, but confirmed an important developmental stability. Demographic variables were found to affect the amount of change in the marital relationship. Families with non-working mothers and those with lower education levels experienced greatest decrease in relationship quality. (Contains four tables.) (JPB)

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PARTNERS AND PARENTS: DEVELOPMENTAL CHANGES IN MARITAL RELATION DURING THE TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD[1]

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In the framework of a longitudinal investigation, a group of parents were studied during their transition to parenthood. The families were chosen according to distinct socio-demographic variables. Fathers and mothers were interviewed separately, before becoming parents and when the babies were 10-12 months old, using a long interviewes tapping into various contents related to their transitions to parenthood. We discuss in this poster the developmental trends observed in some dimensions of married life: quality of marital relationship and partner's perceived support.
Results obtained show a relative decrease in several aspect of married life, but also confirm an important developmental stability. Data also show important and significant socio-demographic differences in these trends during the transition to parenthood.

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AIMS

- To study marital relation during the transition to parenthood, specially, the change and/or stability in the quality of this relationship.
- To analyze the developmental change in marital support during the process of becoming parent.
- To explore the variability in the different topics above refered. Likewise, to study the possible differences according to the sociodemographic variables.

METHOD

Subjets

A group of 95 families were studied longitudinally from the beginning of the mother's pregnancy (T1) until their children were 10-12 months old (T2). The parents differed according to several sociodemographic variables: previous experience as parents (primiparous and non-primiparous), level of education (high, medium, and low), and mothers' labour status (single- and dual-earner families).

Instruments and procedure

At T1 fathers and mothers were interviewed separately using the *Interview at the Women's Pregnancy* (IWP). This instrument was designed to explore several contents related to the process of becoming parent: social network and social support, marital relationship, division of domestic labor, expected father's involvement on childrearing, resource sources for facing parenthood, etc. At T2 families were visited at their homes, and we interviewed parents again, using the *Interview at the First Year* (IFY), with similar characteristics to the IWP and adding contents, like the satisfaction with the parenthood or self- and partner-evaluation as parent.

In both IWP and IFY, we obtained information about several topics related to marital relationships, among others:

- *Quality of marital relation:* Each parent described their marital relation by a scale, which was composed of different dimensions (communication, unity, satisfaction, etc.). The final data of this scale could range between 5 and 15 points.
- *Partner's support:* Each parent described the level of perceived support from the spouse. The support evaluated was refered to the parenthood as well as other aspects (work, personal matters, etc.). In both cases, the final data could range between 1 and 25 points.

RESULTS AND DISCUSION

Table 1 shows the global results obtained from the total of the subjets. As we can see. 1. there is a significant decrease in the perceived quality of marital relationship during the transition to parenthood, but we found an important stability between T1 and T2 too. With respect to partner support, data analysis show the existence of a significant stability in both types of support from T1 to T2, and a moderate increase in support for parenthood and decrease in support for other contents; nevertheless, these changes were not significat.

		T1	T2	t	r
Quality of marital relation		14.03	13.45	3.42***	.346****
Partner support	For parenthood	18.71	19.02	-0.82	.214*
	For other topics	20.76	20.09	0.91	.199*

Table 1: *Longitudinal change (*p<.05 ***p<.001 ****p<.000)*

Nevertheless, these general trends in the results show interesting differences when we control the sociodemographics variables in the analysis. In terms of gender (see Table 2), we must point out that mothers experience a significant decrease in the quality of the marital relationship, whereas fathers do not. Regarding marital support, we find a reverse pattern according to gender: while mothers experience a slight decrease in perceived support from their spouses which is not statistically significant, men claim to receive more support from their wives in all aspects after they become parents.

		Mothers			Fathers		
		T1	T2	Sig.	T1	T2	Sig.
Quality of marital relation		14.24	13.14	***	14.05	13.82	
Partner support	For parenthood	18.64	18.24		17.65	20.22	*
	For other topics	21.33	19.98		20.37	20.54	#

Table 2: *Longitudinal change according to gender*
*(*p<.05 ***p<.001 ****p<.000 #p close to .05)*

Regarding the role played by mothers' labour status, our data show that wheter mothers work outside the home or not sets important differences amog families. Specifically, families with non-working mothers are the ones who experience the greatest decrease in the quality of their relationship.

		Dual-earner families			Single-earner families		
		T1	T2	Sig.	T1	T2	Sig.
Quality of marital relation		14.14	13.77		14.17	13.25	***
Partner support	For parenthood	18.07	20.18		18.33	18.51	
	For other topics	20.11	21.51		21.32	19.62	#

Table 3: *Longitudinal change according to mother's work status*
*(*p<.05 ***p<.001 ****p<.000 #p close to .05)*

Finally, the change experienced in the quality of the marital relationship also showed a significant relationship with parents' education level. The higher the education level is, the less significant the decrease experienced by couples.

		Low			Medium			Hight		
		T1	T2	Sig.	T1	T2	Sig.	T1	T2	Sig.
Quality of marital relation		14.04	13.19	**	14.18	13.43	#	14.54	14.18	
Partner support	For parenthood	17.21	17.36		20.05	20.13		16.09	21.45	*
	For other topics	20.29	19.26		20.89	20.97		23.63	21.09	*

Table 4: *Longitudinal change according to educational level*
*(*p<.05 ***p<.001 ****p<.000 #p close to .05)*

CONCLUSIONS

The literature on the transition to parenthood has shown , like the data obtained by our study, that marital dynamics are affected by a baby's arrival to the family. Nevertheless, our data show that the changes experienced are not uniform in all families, but that they vary significantly according to certain characteristics, such as gender, education level, and whether the mother works outside the home or not.

Finally, the results obtained also show that in most cases the changes experienced are not too great, and that, in any case, they lie within a considerable intrafamiliar stability.